

*Once Two Islands* by Dawn Garisch (Kwela) R140

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Shakespeare's *The Tempest* has been enjoying something of a vogue, its basic given of a group of Europeans settling on a "savage" island offering a useful hook for the post-colonialists. Dawn Garisch, too, acknowledges a debt to this play, and bases some of her characters on Shakespeare's.

This is, however, no post-colonial tract nor a slavish adaptation of the Shakespearean model. Garisch has borrowed lightly, and made the story entirely her own. As her title indicates, she goes Shakespeare one better, in having two islands rather than one – an arrangement that turns out to be central to her theme. For the main island, Ergo, is presided over by Dr Prosper, the purveyor of Western medicine, Dorado Bardelli, the representative of law and order, Minister Kohler, the Christian pastor, and Clarence Peters, the mayor: in short, a society based on the tenets of reason and justice as they have been passed on from the mainland. On the other island, Impossible, dwells the "witch" Sophia, exiled on the charge of having indirectly caused the death of her ward, the mentally disturbed Astrid. Sophia has a deformed son of uncertain paternity called Callum.

Shakespeareans will recognise Dr Prosper, Sophia and Callum as the sorcerer Prospero, the witch Sycorax and the "salvage and deformed slave" Caliban; Dr Prosper's daughter Gulai, then, would correspond to Prospero's daughter Miranda. But in fact the Shakespearean allusions seem to operate as much by ironical contrast as by correspondence; a case in point is the recasting of the Miranda-Ferdinand-Prospero dynamic into something considerably less benign. In so far as Garisch does exploit the Shakespearean parallel, she would seem to be pitting two forms of "magic" against each other: the rational science of medicine against the "Old Ways" practised by Sophia, in which veneration of the ancestors plays more of a role than science.

Gulai, who gradually assumes the role of main character, is torn between loyalty to her father and the attraction of the Old Ways, with their musical spells and their prerational approach to healing. As the daughter of an island woman, who died soon after her birth, Gulai has retained a link with all that her father abhors; indeed, in infancy she was suckled by Sophia, and she is fascinated by Callum – who is, perhaps a bit disappointingly, considerably more meek and mild than his Shakespearean prototype. The two islands, we are told on the first page, were formed by "the power of the dragon"; and though the dragon subsides again, it remains just below the surface, ready to erupt again, whether through human action or meteorological upheaval. For the inhabitants of Ergo are plagued by all that is repressed by their civilised arrangements, and that they hoped to banish to Impossible along with Sophia: there are infidelities, enmities, even a murder, in which more of the islanders are implicated than they care to have known. Surrounded by these "dragon forces that underlie life", Gulai has to find her own way, imperfectly guided by her possessive father and his vindictive mistress Veronica. Torn between "desire and restraint, ... those contrary dragons", Gulai has to come to terms with her own burgeoning sexuality: almost succumbing to the urgings of Raef, the island boy, her virtue survives, only to be surrendered, with fatal consequence, to Hal, the sailor from the mainland.

There is, in short, plenty of action in this novel, mediated through a style that is often lyrical, always engrossing. For all their down-to-earth cussedness, Garisch's characters are the bearers of a poetic view of existence, in which daily detail becomes transformed by the elemental forces of an island existence: "Winter came again, flying across the world to fill the spaces autumn had prepared; winter tilted the light to slant from the north and tossed capes of roiling cloud over Ergo and Impossible, dusting snow on their tips. The seas boiled cold; their salt-tipped waves scurried after seamless corridors of roaring air."

As a poet Garisch is clearly drawn to the mystique of the Old Ways; but she is also a medical doctor, which makes her treatment of Dr Prosper somewhat puzzling. His benighted resistance to Sophia's ministering is depicted as a personality defect rather than an intellectual position; but it is difficult to banish thoughts of beetroot and garlic when reading of Sophia's traditional remedies. Garisch imbues Sophia with a human warmth lacking in the narrow world view of the doctor, and it is no doubt true that much medical science is barrenly bereft of human concern; but one wonders whether libations to the ancestors still have a useful role to play in a time of plague. Sophia may be no witch; but I'd hate to see her deal with an AIDS epidemic.

Still, this is a novel, not a medical or sociological treatise, and it is to Garisch's credit that she so spaciouly and evocatively explores the non-rational, instinctive roots of human behaviour. Given the decontextualised island society she creates, the novel works beautifully as a depiction of precarious equilibrium between the "two contrary dragons" in a self-contained community.

What if the dragon wakes "forcing change on those who had forgotten the power that underlies life"? Garisch chooses not to answer that question: her islanders are sent off into an uncertain future, both modern science and the Old Ways rendered futile by the "subterranean beast" lurking just under the surface of all existence.